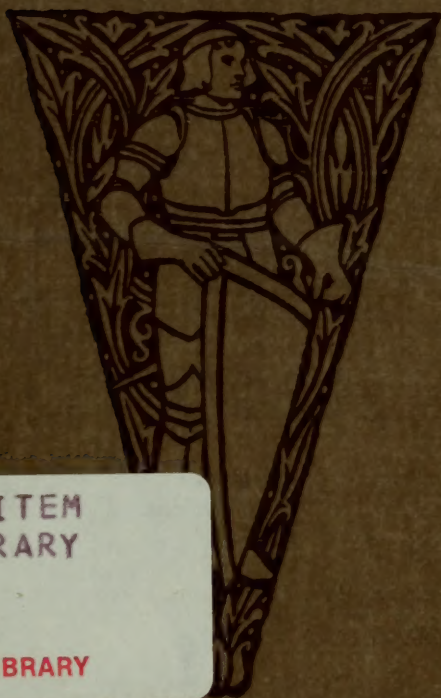


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AN OPEN LETTER TO ENGLISH GENTLEMEN



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AN OPEN LETTER



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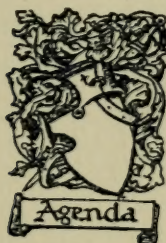
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THE UNIVERSITY OF
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AN OPEN LETTER TO ENGLISH GENTLEMEN

"This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea . . .
This land of such dear souls ; this dear, dear land."
Rich. II.



THE AGENDA CLUB
LONDON
MCMXII

“God gives each man one life, like a
lamp; then gives
That lamp due measure of oil: lamp
lighted—hold high, wave wide
Its comfort for others to share? once
quench it, what help is left?”

HN

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064

1912

TO
THE YOUNGER GENERATION
IN MEMORY OF A
GREAT MAN
WHO LOVED AND BELIEVED IN IT

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TO
THE YOUNGER GENERATION
IN MEMORY OF A
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An Open Letter to English Gentlemen

GENTLEMEN,

I am addressing you by the most honourable of titles; and for reasons which I hope to make plain am using that title in the present instance in its restricted sense. That is to say, that while I am on the one hand excluding from my purview all such as have inherited merely the accidentals of your order, an ample fortune, an honoured name, a more or less perfunctory code fulfilled in the letter rather than in the spirit, I am at the same time excluding the many men whose shoes so often you are not worthy to loose, men who have the essential stuff of the gentlemen in them, but have inherited nothing—not fortune nor privilege, nor caste alliances nor unfettered opportunity, nor the natural mould of culture, but have won what they have won by their own force of character or ability.

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I am appealing to that still extant but not increasing type—the well-bred Englishman—to men of gentle birth, of an inherited courtesy and courage, “good sportsmen,” incapable of dishonesty, lying with difficulty, unassuming, undemonstrative, plain, blunt, loyal.

I will remind you of a tithe of your advantages.

In your infancy you were well fed and housed and tended with a watchful solicitude. You went in due course to a public school, where, among possibly less desirable things, you learnt in many of the essential activities of life to “play the game.” Quite possibly, though this is unessential, you had broad ancestral acres to take your holiday pleasure in, and escaped altogether that hardship (and discipline) of narrow means and cramped surroundings. In any case, *ex hypothesi*, you had the fostering care of English gentlefolk; the instincts of a gentleman which were inborn in you were sheltered

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and developed by many affectionate and prudent hands. And in due course you went into one of the services or to your university, and passed therefrom to your chosen (or allotted) niche, the law, the bar, the school, the church, the hospitals, the city.

Well gentlemen—*noblesse oblige* what have you done in exchange for it all? I do not mean for yourselves, but for England?

If you were self-made men, having contrived your own opportunities and wrested the whole of your success from a reluctant environment by quick thinking, hard work and normal slices of luck (or acute practice) it would be more open to you to plead that you owed no man anything, that you had had a precious hard fight to get to the top,—that, having got there, meant to stay there and that the devil might take the lowermost.

I need not say that your self-made

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man rarely argues this brutal case, but he would have such right to do so as you can in no wise claim.

But you, gentlemen, are not self-made. I have an obstinate persuasion that because to so large an extent England made you, you owe, and you will as good sportsmen be glad to pay, a heavy debt to England.

And I am rushing in where better men have feared to tread, to remind you of this debt, and, if you will permit me, to suggest some ways in which a chosen few of you may attempt to redeem it.

Briefly, I am going to ask you, to turn your serious attention to politics and to a patriotism broader and less self-regarding than you may have hitherto found the occasion for embracing.

Let me hasten to add that I do not ask you to enter the established political arena, or even to take a given side, or to listen to any special plea of mine for Liberal or Tory or Socialist. But, to

state my case in a word, England has need of her hereditary gentlemen in this rapid and perilous change from the Old order to the New, of which the present political manifestations are only the jaunty herald.

Permit me to interject an episode in the salient history of that young world-power in which the spirit of patriotism has attained a very high pitch.

In 1876, at the birth of the New Japan, after the Shogun had been broken, and the great nobility had voluntarily laid their privileges and dues at the feet of the Emperor, there remained the problem of the Samurai for the new government to deal with. The Samurai were, as you know, the gentry of Japan, not notably wealthy or powerful, except as a body, but simply an order of Japanese gentlemen to whom was entrusted the whole defence of their country, and whose most valued privilege was to wear that double sword which was the mark of their order.

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Owing to the danger of leaving such a feudal remnant in a modern state it became necessary to compass their dissolution as a class, and there were further financial troubles caused by the fact that the new order had deprived them of practically the whole source of their revenue.

A beggarly pension of some £8 or £12 the year was promised them by the government, which after a few years' time was cancelled, as far as I recollect the story, and they were thrown for the most part into a state of penury.

It is the jewel of this splendid history that the Samurai accepted without a murmur the whole ruin of their fortune—accepted it as a necessary step in the advance of the country they loved.

But when, recognising the necessity of a new and more democratic fighting class, the government proceeded to throw open the military service to the lower orders, and at the same time sus-

pended the wearing of the double sword, the Samurai rose in rebellion—a rebellion that was only quenched in blood.

The moral of such a story in this commercial day will not easily escape you.

It must be apparent to you, whatever the sincerity or the convention of your personal politics, that the hereditary nobility of England—we will abstract for the moment from the attitude of their opponents—have recently left something to be desired in their attitude. There has been little constructive criticism, and much aggrieved protestation; there has not in general been a very conspicuous manifestation of deliberative fitness, or much evidence of a problem foreseen, of prepared solutions or amendments. There has not been much humour, and not too much dignity. Nor, again, has there been much of that spirit which inspired the splendid renunciations of the last great chiefs and the quixotic Samurai of feudal

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Japan as their great contribution towards the building of their new empire.

If the feudal chiefs have failed, more or less, what of the Samurai?

To any who can read the signs of the times there is a New England a-sowing—not necessarily a better England. It is indeed likely enough that with the tares much wheat will be pulled by impatient husbandmen.

I write as one who would see the gentlemen of England, the chosen chivalry of a great country (a chivalry which still exists even if it be obscured by false standards, blatant advertisement, cynical newspapers, and tortuous politics) taking its place in, and even inspiring and leading, the new movement.

Speaking for myself I would prefer to see the destinies of my country in your hands rather than in those of various men you wot of, not because I doubt their ability or sincerity, but because you have something that they lack.

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It has, of course, to be proved that you do also not lack something which they have. For myself, I do not believe this. I build, indeed, on the conviction that in your ranks are to be found many at least of the true aristoi, the truest champions of justice, liberty, and enlightened patriotism.

Here I will save you the trouble of skipping a few pages by omitting a disquisition on the relation of politics to patriotism. I will merely state my thesis in the form of a platitude, that there is absent from the political ethos of to-day the spirit of chivalrous service and self-sacrifice.

Gentlemen, I interpret your smile to mean : " Here is another of those dull dogs who won't see life as it is. Service and self-sacrifice, my dear sir, are admirable in copy books, New Testaments, and that kind of impracticable document. You ought to know that politics is a dirty game, necessary of course, but em-

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phatically dirty. Vide current speeches, letters, posters,"*

Dirty in fact, yes, but necessarily dirty? or necessarily quite so dirty?

Gentlemen, I don't believe it, and I don't believe it because I still believe in you against the available evidence possibly.

For to tell truth I do not notice among the members of your order any greater disposition to put aside class prejudices, to distinguish personal and trivial from national and profound issues, than among those who have not enjoyed the advantages of your liberal education, or your cultured *milieu*. I see you, too, thinking and voting, so to speak, in rows, I see you, too, quite often frankly looking at and speaking of politics as a pocket matter. I see you, too, in the toils of disingenuous paraphrases, outworn shibboleths, and small side issues.

I hear you (and you hear each other,

*General Election, 1910.

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don't you gentlemen?) talking much nonsense on both sides of current questions, judging great issues on insufficient evidence and entirely inadequate knowledge, freely imputing base motives, cheerfully starting false scents.

But I believe, not that the glory of your old heritage is gone for ever, but that just for a short space "all is not well with England" because, perhaps you gentlemen, listless or busy with other things, have not noticed whither your country is really tending.

You are patriots of course, you have always been that. Do we not know your record? do you think that we—even we others who may for one absurd reason or another be not in love with war—forget that quiet English courage that finds a mere sixth form boy in the broken square at Abuklea, or an Indian border scrap, endowed with the splendid *sang froid* of a seasoned veteran? Do you imagine that we forget the many who risked and the

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few who gave all in the last great national trouble?

Gentlemen, if you were of that admirable brotherhood, please understand that you are honoured by those others of us who remained at home. And if you were not, I know at least that you are, as I have said, clean men, chivalrous to women, and to the man that's down, good sportsmen, loving the game and playing it for love of it. But do you by any chance fail to realise that it is a more difficult (because a more common and work-a-day thing) to live for your country than to die for it?

You will fight, gentlemen, will you not also serve?

"Mrs. L., a married daughter of the deceased, said the old couple occupied a back room for which they paid 1s. 6d. a week."

The Coroner. "Have the old people enough to live on?"

Witness. "Father could not work, and

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mother sold matches and laces to keep things going as best she could, but, of course, she could not earn more than about 3s. a week."

The Coroner. "Then she cannot have had enough to eat, as after paying rent this old couple have had only 1s. 6d. a week to live on, a most awful thing to contemplate."

Witness. "No, I don't think she did have enough to eat, and she has been very bad in health also. Poor old mother used to work very hard for years at the wash-tub, but her strength failed her at the last; but she battled on to keep dad."

The medical officer said death was primarily due to pneumonia and pleurisy.

The Coroner. "Is it a case of want?"

Witness. "Yes."

The Coroner. "Can I class it in my report as a death from starvation?"

Witness. "Yes."

The Coroner. "It is a pitiful story, and

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one that is getting all too frequent.”*

The Jury returned a verdict of “Death from starvation.”

May I put it this way—that it is a more difficult, a more heroic, a more patriotic thing to weigh such stories as these with deliberate conscious intention, to feel a poignant human sympathy, a righteous indignation, and a certain sense of responsibility and guilt; to translate the sympathy and indignation into action—into serious study of such things, into endeavour to mitigate the horror of their frequency—it is harder, I say, to do these things than to face an enemy in the battle line. Obviously so, since in practice for one who is found to do the first, there are thousands who would welcome the chance of doing the second.

May I rub it in, gentlemen, that vitally important though it be, it is less important to defend England than to have an

*This, with one other short extract, is from *The Camel and the Needle's Eye*, by Arthur Ponsonby.

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England that is worth defending? And may I, to make the point I have chiefly in mind, remind you that till you have begun to look at England with an eye to Ancoats and Cowcaddens, or to those broad acres of squalid South London that you see from the Dover express, on your pleasant way to Paris or the Riviera, till *you*, gentlemen, *ex hypothesi* the cream of the nation, have given the matter *your* attention, your country is missing a valuable aid to the solution of a profoundly disquieting problem. I will explain that foolish piece of optimism later if you will have patience.

“It is roughly estimated that there are (in these islands) $1\frac{1}{2}$ millions who can be classed as rich, $3\frac{1}{2}$ millions comfortably off, 38 millions of poor, of whom some 12 or 13 millions are in constant need.”

If, gentlemen, you had given a considerable time to the study and discussion of the problem as thus crudely stated, and had decided after the deliberation due to so

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serious a matter that there was no remedy, or that it did not concern you if there were, I should have nothing to say. As it is I have perhaps too much.

My experience—and I have taken some pains to arrive at a conclusion—is that the matter has never been properly faced by you. From the clergy with their “The poor you have always with you” to the pompous ass who tells you that drink and dirt and their own fault generally is the cause of all the evils of the poor, and that, anyway, taking away all the money from those who have and sharing it up all round wouldn’t do any good, because at the end of the week some would have spent more, earned more, or stolen more than others—so obvious a truth as surely to be not worth repeating at this date—there’s a tendency to dismiss this, the greatest problem which faces a patriotic Englishman, too easily, too lightly.

We have grown accustomed cynically

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to estimate the aspirations of social reformers as the desire of the "have nots" for the goods of the "haves." Not only is it forgotten that the most sincere and effective pleaders for change are conspicuously those who have won for themselves in open competition a fair share of worldly goods (then we turn round and dub them hypocrites, thereby having it both ways)—but it is also forgotten that the whole attitude of conservative social reform might be as fairly reduced to the ennobling Christlike formula of "what we have we hold!"

I will, indeed, record it as my careful observation of the attitude of those who give this matter public and private attention that there *is* a desire to change things for the better for those 38 millions of poor fellows, and those 12 millions of poor devils, *yet so as to retain things essentially as they are.*

The extraordinary advantages of various aspects of the present system to the

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said poor fellows (or devils, as the case may be) are glibly insisted on.

For instance, the fox-hunting man will point out how much excellent work that glorious industry provides for whippers-in, huntsmen, stablefolk, dog and horse breeders, hatters, tailors, joiners, barbed wire makers, surgeons and undertakers. Should it be pointed out that the same amount of capital, in money, land, brains, courage, energy, could be employed to better and fuller purpose and could in particular give employment to tenfold that number, do you think that he would drop fox-hunting? I am not saying on the one hand that he would not, or on the other that he should: I am merely suggesting that if he wouldn't when he should, then the talk about employment is just veiled cant.

“Gentlemen, let us clear our minds of cant!” Let us have the courage to admit to ourselves that where our purses or pleasures are concerned our sincerity in

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judgement is very heavily handicapped.

Grant that it by no means follows that your Master must break up his hunt, yet is it true that he is apt to put an entirely inflated value on the economical advantages of the fox-hunting industry, to the nation, and to the poor. When in another vein he says what he really believes, that a man may do what he wills with his own, that fox-hunting teaches a man to ride straight, gives him courage and resource, makes and keeps him fit, has, in fact, helped to turn out the best type of modern Englishman—he is talking good, sound, respectable if somewhat one-sided sense, and we can all understand his point of view.

I am nearing my point. It is conceivable, it is I think extraordinarily probable, that the true course of English patriotism should, in the near future, take a line contrary to the material interests of the more fortunate of the patriots.

I am sure and it is the heart of my

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stumbling message to you, gentlemen, that no man can at this crisis serve his country in the truest sense except in a spirit of service, or of readiness to sacrifice self.

Not what to get, or what to escape, but what to give, that is the spirit that shall re-create England.

It is possible to apply certain tests to oneself in imaginative review. It does not follow that if one successfully passes them (in imagination) one would pass them equally well in actuality. But it does seem to me to follow that if one cannot pass them successfully the very honesty which confesses the failure is the finest approach to a new attitude: and at the same time a wholesome shock to our complacency.

If, say, to take a case, it should be found that the employment of boy golf caddies had a very serious effect on their industrial efficiency and on their consequent futures, would you, gentlemen, vote for a self-denying ordinance to do without them, and put up with the less

(let us suppose for our case) satisfactory and efficient adult: would you even, at a push, agree to carry your own clubs? And if you ask "Why should we?" what if I answered tentatively "for England."

Do not say this is the talk of prigs. That is a phrase, and we are dealing with ideas. I am sincerely convinced, gentlemen, that the obligations of our order (if for the moment you will allow me to identify myself with you) demand that if the solution of any of the great problems of poverty in this country involved very considerable, even very serious, material inconvenience to ourselves, we should be in conscience bound to move towards that solution. As surely bound as I, a man of peace and untrained to arms, but yet a fit and able-bodied citizen, should be bound in conscience (or honour—that's the same) to undergo the extraordinary inconvenience of being killed if, say in the case of invasion, the safety of my country, demanded it.

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Do not misunderstand me. I am making no such absurd supposition as that if you gave up your wealth and position you would effect a cure of this pressing problem of national regeneration.

This would scarcely be in itself more effective than your half-crown tips to some poor devil of a cab-opener inspired by an intense movement of ineffectual sympathy. Not this, but a study, painstaking, open-minded, cleared of prejudice and of fears for your own position, is required, and it is impossible for me to believe that this would not provide a substantial contribution towards solving the apparently insoluble.

If for a decade you, the gentlemen of England, were to give a tithe of the energy and the enthusiasm which you give to honest sport you would break the back of the worst of the problem.

And if you did not solve it you would at least effect this not inconsiderable achievement, that instead of the problem

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being slurred over and consequently misunderstood or ignored, it would be recognized in all its pressing need and hideousness to be dealt with by your children.

And if you will let me intrude my own unquenchable faith, it is that, while we cannot hope ever to banish narrow means and poverty from our country, we can get rid of abject misery. I see no sufficient reason why the Embankment and all that it stands for in the way of pain, disease, hunger, sunless despair and inevitable degradation should not go the way of such damnable tyrannies of circumstance, as in France, the right of the seigneur to the honour of his serf's daughter—or, as here in Merry England not threequarters of a century back, the right to harness the little pitiful, patient children to the coal trucks and drive them crawling, iron chain round their middles and between their bowed legs, through the dark galleries of our coal mines the better to “develop the

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splendid mineral resources of a great kingdom.”

Such of you as are Harrovians will remember a certain bronze tablet which records the fact that here Antony Ashley Cooper, afterwards Lord Shaftesbury of imperishable memory, made the resolution to devote his life to the amelioration of the conditions of the poor in England. The circumstance was merely the carrying of the coffin of a pauper down the hill by four drunken men who spilt their pathetic burden at his feet. He dreamed his dream and the upshot of it was some golden clauses in our Statute Books, and some blots upon the escutcheon of England removed for ever. Do you think that there were none to call him an impracticable fool, to damn him with the faintest of supercilious praise as a dreamer and idealist?

And if a dozen of us could do as much as he, then we and England would be thrice blest! It is an unreflecting pusilla-

nimity which shall say that this is impossible!

Gentlemen, there are two kinds of dreams, the dream that what has been must needs go on for ever, and the dream that there are better things in store if only the dreamers will work and suffer for their accomplishment; and it is those who dream this second kind of foolish dream that are the makers of history.

I have emphasized your patriotism. You love England, you feel things about the Empire. You would cheerfully rally to her defence. I put it to you as an Imperial Englishman that the most vital count in any serious and sufficient programme of Imperial politics is an improvement in the breed and in the environment of Englishmen at home.

Is it possible that when you are dreaming of England you leave out of conscious calculation the vast majority of Englishmen, that when you think of the defence of the hearth and home you only

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mean such hearths as are amply and hospitably ablaze, such homes as you could without discomfort visit. It is, of course, a very common perspective of your class.

Love of country in its most essential sense means no less than love of countrymen.

It follows, or seems to me to follow, that it embraces the love of those who live in homes joyless at the best, and hopeless at the worst, in the affected patches of the body corporate. And if it seems slightly ridiculous as well as tedious of me to suggest that you can possibly feel the high emotion of love towards such negligible creatures, I suggest, gentlemen, it is merely because you do not know them, because you have not had occasion or taken the trouble to understand. You do not penetrate below the relatively unattractive exteriors and behind the often uninviting manners to the splendid courage, the shining charities that so often inform their lives.

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A Cook at a Clapham Junction fire passes two women to the ladder and disappears in the flames: a miner goes in cold blood to the rescue of his imprisoned comrades without any clamour of battle to cheer him.

There is the constant happening of the neighbour's child being taken and cared for during those temporary absences of the bread-winner which are not always entirely unconnected with the activities of the police: thirteen hungry men apply for two jobs of porter in the Covent Garden Market; a preliminary council is held and the two married men with the most children are passed forward, and the jobs fall to them by defect of competition.

If we do not love it is because we do not understand. And if we do not understand? Is it not perhaps because the price of understanding is serious study, serious thought, serious purpose?

The politician is wont to flatter while

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he despises the lower classes; it is instructive to weigh all the difference between his smoking room and platform estimates of the working man.

The patriot loving his country will try to understand and love his countrymen and knowing how much he himself owes to the happy chances of his environment and how relatively little to his own unaided resources will see the true patriotism in an endeavour to effect a change in the environment of the vast numbers of his countrymen. He will see defective education and training, insufficient feeding, neglected physical culture, loose discipline, depressing surroundings, cruelly circumscribed opportunity as the obvious cause of so much of the surface unsatisfactorinesses of the great body of the workers.

Gentlemen, you must have had occasion to note, either in your own experience or in authentic anecdote, the valour in action of the "thin red 'ero:" and not

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his valour merely, which, however fine, is necessarily only an occasional quality, but his general serviceableness, dependableness and likeableness. You may have reflected that this same raw material sucked into the city vortex would often but have added to the pathetic wreckage which eddies deplorably about the bridges of the Embankment. And if you have so reflected you will have gauged something of the extraordinary potentialities of an improved environment.

And here I may conveniently say lest you should too readily write me down a sentimental ass with the easy philosophy that a few sighs and a little slumming on your part are going to effect any considerable cleansing of our choked Augean stables, that the remedies are to be sought in scientific fields: that not an easy sentimentality, but a certain measured ruthlessness will be the note of the conscious philanthropy of the near future.

But the first step towards such a move-

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ment is a great compassion, a splendid inspiration.

Gentlemen of England, there is a noble work lying to your hand. With your training, your leisure, your comfortable circumstance, your unfettered opportunity, it presents itself to you as a responsibility you may not lightly thrust aside, as a debt you may not callously and ignobly repudiate.

And you cannot really fail. Solutions are to be found. We have learnt so much, achieved such wonders, dug and builded and planned; analysed, synthesized, organised. It is astounding that we have done so much with our possessions, so little with our people. Perhaps we thought (foolishly as it happens) that there was no money in it.

Nothing to the patriot matters so much, can matter so much, as this regeneration of our people, unless haply you have fallen across that most mournful and paralysing of creeds that nothing matters at all.

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Even if it were a forlorn hope, your obvious duty would call to it. It is yours to rouse opinion, to waken the sleeping complaisance, the dead imaginations of your class, to challenge the smooth prophecies, to ask the inconvenient questions, to shatter the traditional follies.

The old high breed of fine enthusiasts, of generous, compassionate spirits, is not dead. A new channel is wanted for their splendid energies: a new issue to their arduous campaigns.

A brotherhood of that high patriotism which is the fuller service of suffering humanity, the "spending and being spent" without hope of reward or gratitude may be the appointed channel. Though there should be no hope of reward there *is* reward exceeding great—better than to stroke your boat, to go everywhere, to "make (or marry) your pile" is to stand with Shaftesbury and Wilberforce, with Elizabeth Fry and Howard, with Damien of Molokai.

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To justify this optimism which assures you that you cannot fail, I will say this much. We have made progress in humanitarian feeling, in ameliorative legislation, progress even towards the recognition of scientific method. That progress has been spasmodic, slow, fettered by privilege, by class interests and apathies in a thousand ways.

Gentlemen, if a picked hundred of your breed, if a score, if a dozen, made it the work of your lives to face this problem; if you entered upon this work, not for the sake of what you could make out of it, but of what you could put into it; not for what you could get, but for what you could give—you would take rank as builders of Empire beyond your highest dreams.

I only postulate that life is not a mere nightmare chaos, that something is worth while: and further, that history proves abundantly that the wise labours of the selfless pioneers do bear actual immortal fruit. The rest is with you, gentlemen.

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You can raise this splendid contingent from your accomplished ranks.

It will not escape you that you alone have the power of working for your country unhampered by the easy charge of self-seeking. If, say, some little Scotch apothecary or eloquent miner take upon himself to plead for the redress of grievances or the extension of the privileges of the poor, it is cheerfully assumed that self-interest is the motive power, and whether such charges be just or unjust, they emphatically clog the wheels of movement. You start with this inestimable aid, that your hands are not only clean but beyond suspicion. It is but one other of your incomparable advantages.

There is enough to be done, God knows; and worth doing, that is certain; and able to be done, that is demonstrable.

Gentlemen, the game is in your hands. What do *you* propose to do?

I have the honour to remain,

Yours very sincerely,

PARS MINIMA.

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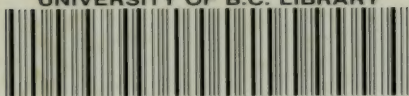
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